

Laguna Seca Rancho
(Rancho del Refugio de la Laguna Seca)
North side of U. S. Highway 101
Coyote
Santa Clara County
California

HABS No. CA-2003

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PHOTOGRAPHS

HISTORICAL AND DESCRIPTIVE DATA

Historic American Buildings Survey
National Architectural and Engineering Record
National Park Service
Department of the Interior
Washington, D. C. 20243

HISTORIC AMERICAN BUILDINGS SURVEY HABS No. CA-2003

LAGUNA SECA RANCHO
(Rancho del Refugio de la Laguna Seca)

Location: Northeast of U. S. Highway 101, Coyote, Santa Clara County, California.

USGS Morgan Hill Quadrangle, Universal Transverse Mercator
Coordinates: 10.612200.4119950 (Barn)
10.612560.4120450 (Stone Building)

Present Owner: County of Santa Clara.

Present Occupant: Verle Lybbert family (house - stone building vacant)

Present Use: Stud farm.

Significance: The Laguna Seca Rancho was first held by Juan Alvirez, whose ranching operations included running a grist mill. The property was extensively developed by the family of William Fisher, who acquired the 23,040 acres in 1845. Captain John Charles Frémont and his troops camped on the ranch in the spring of 1846. The stone building, originally the grist mill, is certainly one of the oldest structures in Santa Clara County, and the barn, which is of a form which predominates in the County, having a high gable-roofed center flanked by shed-roofed side aisles, may date from the mid-nineteenth century. The office building was constructed for William Fisher's youngest son, Fiacro, who continued to develop the land as one of the most successful stock and grain producing ranches in the area.

PART I. HISTORICAL INFORMATION

A. Physical History:

1. Dates of erection: The stone building (grist mill) was built at an undetermined date between 1823 and 1845. The barn appears to be the first and only one erected by the Fishers and may date from before 1850. The office was presumably built for Fiacro Fisher and appears to date from the last quarter of the nineteenth century. The house, which occupies the site of an earlier adobe house, was built in 1894.
2. Architects: Unknown.
3. Original and subsequent owners: The building sites are located on property known as the Rancho del Refugio de la Laguna Seca between U. S. Highway 101 and Coyote Creek, southeast of Metcalf Road in Coyote, having County Assessment Number 727-26-33.

1823 Rancho del Refugio de la Laguna Seca was granted provisionally to Juan Alvirez by the Pueblo Council.

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The following in an incomplete chain of title based on records in the Office of the Recorder, Santa Clara County Courthouse, Santa Clara, California.

- 1834 Deed, July 22, 1834, recorded in Book of Patents A, page 91. Government of Mexico through Governor Figueroa sold 19,972.92 acres of land to Juan Alvarez.
- 1845 Deed, recorded in Book of Patents A, page 91. Juan Alvarez sold 23,040 acres at court-ordered auction for debt liquidation to William Fisher for \$6,000.
- 1850 William Fisher died on April 5, 1850, willing his property to his wife, Liberata Cesaña Fisher.
- 1855 Will, December 3, 1855, recorded in Book O, page 163. Daniel Murphy was appointed guardian and trustee of lands for Fiacro, Eulogia, Guillermo, Thomas and Cyprian Fisher, minor heirs of William Fisher.
- 1857 Deed, July 8, 1857, recorded in Book A, page 109. Liberata Bull sold 9,986 acres to her son-in-law, Daniel Murphy, for \$20,000. (Liberata Fisher had remarried in November 1851, becoming Mrs. Bull.)
- 1858 Court Decree, July 26, 1858, recorded in Book B, page 122. Probate Court awarded 1/12 of the total property to each of William Fisher's minor children. His daughter Mary and her husband, Daniel Murphy, received 7/12 of the land. (The stone building is on the 1,348-acre section inherited by Eulogia Fisher.)
- 1861 Deed, May 4, 1861, recorded in Book J, page 459. John Yontz (by John Murphy, sheriff) to Daniel Murphy.
- 1864 Book 3. U. S. Government patent to Fiacro Fisher.
- 1865 Eulogia Fisher married Daniel Rota and took possession of her inheritance.
- 1866 Deed, August 5, 1866, recorded in Book U, page 637. Daniel Murphy to Fiacro Fisher et al.
- 1876 Deed, June 8, 1876, recorded in Book 41, page 333. Eulogia Fisher Rota sold the 1,348 acres that she had inherited in 1858 to her brother, Fiacro Fisher, for \$25,000.
- 1909 Will, April 4, 1909, Fiacro Fisher died, willing his property, including 3,000 acres of land, the stone building, a residence and outbuildings, to his heirs.

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- 1917 Deed, May 12, 1917, recorded in Book 456, page 444. Fiacro Julian Fisher to Frank and Maria Ramelli, portion of the ranch on which the stone building stands.
- 1932 Deed, recorded in Book 4. Fiacro J. Fisher et al to Willis S. Clayton.
- 1972 The Ramellis deeded 900 acres, including the site on which the stone building stands, to the County of Santa Clara.
- 1974 Deed, December 23, 1974, recorded in Book 219, page 19. Willis S. Clayton to County of Santa Clara.
- 4.. Original plans, construction, etc.: The residence was reportedly constructed on the exact site of the adobe house built for William Fisher. (Sawyer, p. 721) That report gives credence to the hypothesis that the barn dates from the mid-1800s.
5. Alterations and additions:

Barn: The large section of the present barn appears to be the oldest section. The hayloft front projecting from the center of it on the southwest was apparently the first addition. The shed-like addition on the northeast appears from its materials and workmanship to be a twentieth-century construction.

Office: The rear (northeast) section of the structure has a type of siding used in the late 1860s and 1870s elsewhere in the County. (See Mine Hill School, New Almaden, HABS No. CA-2005) The front porch has a type of siding that is slightly later than that of the rear section.

Stone Building: The stone building, erected for Juan Alvirez as a grist mill, as indicated by the millstones discovered during recent archeological investigations, had ceased functioning as a mill by 1845, when William Fisher bought the ranch. The milling machinery was all removed at an undetermined date, and the building was later used as a milk-cooling house and later still as a barrack for ranch hands. Its heavy stone construction and splayed window openings gave rise to an erroneous belief in recent times that it had originally been a fort.

B. Historical Context:

Juan Alvirez served as Alcalde (mayor) of San Jose in 1812-1813 and 1837 and as Alcalde of Monterey in 1826. In 1823 he received the Rancho del Refugio de la Laguna Seca by a provisional grant confirmed by Mexican patent in 1834. During his tenure, which ended with his financial difficulties in 1845, the rancho produced vegetables, fruit and grain for its own people, and beef for market.

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The memoirs of John Charles Fremont (1813-1890) record that he camped at William Fisher's Laguna Seca Rancho, where he refitted his expedition and purchased horses and supplies in the early spring of 1846, before Fisher had taken up residence. (Egan, p. 317) Fremont had just conferred with Thomas Oliver Larkin, the Massachusetts merchant who had become U. S. Consul in Monterey, to whom Fremont explained that he:

was engaged in surveying the nearest route from the U. S. to the Pacific Ocean . . . being under the direction of the Bureau of Topographical Engineers . . . that (the journey) was made in the interests of science and of commerce and that the men composing the parties were citizens and not soldiers. (Egan, p. 317, note 12. & Fremont, Memoirs, p. 456)

Fremont's five expeditions between 1842 and 1853, including the one that brought him to Fisher's ranch, are said to have resulted in reliable maps for land-hungry American believers in Manifest Destiny and in spearheading the movement for California Statehood. (Egan, p. XII)

Fremont was the illegitimate son of Jean Charles Fremont, a French Royalist from Lyon who had escaped from the Jacobins to Norfolk, Virginia, and Anne Beverley Whiting, the married daughter of an old Virginia family, whom he had been tutoring in French. (Egan, p. 3)

Fremont, known as "the Pathfinder," mapped and described more of the West than Lewis and Clark. (Egan, p. X) He was influential in the "Bear Flag" revolt of American settlers in California against Mexico in 1846 and accepted appointment as Governor from Commodore Stockton. Both Stockton and Stephen Kearney had orders placing them in command, but when Kearney received further orders making him independent of Stockton, he convicted Fremont of mutiny by court-martial. President Polk remitted the sentence, but Fremont proudly resigned his commission in the Army Topographical Engineers. The discovery of gold on his ranch brought him riches he eventually lost in railroad ventures. In 1850-1851 he served briefly as one of California's first U. S. Senators. (His wife, Jessie, was the daughter of Senator Thomas Hart Benton of Missouri.) In 1856 Fremont was the first Republican presidential candidate, running on the slogan "Free Speech, Free Press, Free Soil, Free Men, Fremont and Victory." He nearly won, in spite of a smear campaign aimed at his illegitimacy. He was General of the West during part of the Civil War and Governor of Arizona Territory in 1878-1881. He died in 1890. Fremont was certainly one of the most romantic and controversial men associated with the history of California. (Egan, passim, p. 523)

The early land speculator William Fisher was born in England and went to Massachusetts as a young man. In 1830 he left Boston for San Jose, where he engaged in the hide and tallow trade. He was half owner with Willard Hawks of the ship "Maria Teresa." In 1834 he married Liberata Cesana, who bore him six children, Mary, Thomas, Cypriano, Guillermo, Fiacro, and Eulogia. He bought the Rancho del Refugio de la Laguna Seca, described as "four square leagues in the shape of a rectangle containing 23,040 acres," at the court sale in 1845 for what was then regarded as the ridiculously high bid of \$6,000 and moved there in April 1846. His foresight was well-justified, for by 1895 just sixty acres of the land

were valued at \$6,000, the original price of the entire tract. In 1847 he imported the first carriage in California from the East, a radical change from the locally popular two-wheeled Mexican carts. William Fisher had become a successful stockman by the time of his death at the age of forty on April 5, 1850. (Anonymous. Sunshine, Fruit and Flowers, p. 78) By around 1849 the ranch was already described as being prosperous in the production of stock, corn and wheat, and as having 1,000 grapevines planted in the garden. (Anonymous, Incidents on the Walk to Monterey")

Fiacro C. Fisher, the youngest son of pioneer William Fisher, was born in Santa Clara County on August 30, 1850, presumably at the ranch. He was educated in San Jose and attended Santa Clara College for two years. He left school to work as foreman for his brother-in-law, neighbor and former guardian, Daniel Murphy, until 1872. (Sawyer, p. 721) From 1872 to 1877 he devoted himself entirely to raising stock on his family's homestead and later constructed the present house and office building. At least part of his time between 1877 and 1894 was spent managing Daniel Murphy's Nevada ranch. (Sawyer, p. 721) It is reported that the new house was "built to keep up with the Murphys." (Pierce, p. 45) Fisher deeded the land for the Coyote Grange Hall in 1892 and built the 1907 Coyote Post Office and served as its first postmaster. (Johnson) He died in 1909. (Will, April 4, 1909) During Fiacro C. Fisher's tenure, the ranch was devoted to stock raising, grain farming, fruit growing, and dairying that included the operation of a creamery.

Fiacro C. Fisher's son, Fiacro Julian Fisher, was born in 1891 and lived at the Laguna Seca Rancho until 1917, when he moved to Cupertino. The 1920s are reflected by the report of one-time owner Willis Clayton that the barn was used by bootleggers, from whom he purchased the property after Prohibition, as the site of a still producing 1,000 gallons of 198-proof alcohol per day. (Pierce, p. 45)

Prepared by: Carolyn Hamm
Project Historian
Historic American Buildings
Survey
August 1977

PART II. ARCHITECTURAL INFORMATION - (Stone Building)

A. General Statement:

1. Architectural character: This is a stone, two-storied and hip-roofed building of undetermined date. It is certainly one of the oldest structures in Santa Clara County.
2. Condition of fabric: Masonry, fair. Frame portions, poor.

B. Description of Exterior:

1. Over-all dimensions: The building is nearly square in plan,

measuring approximately 21 by 23 feet. It is two stories high, measuring 9'9" from floor to ceiling on the first floor and 7'5" from floor to ceiling on the second floor. The over-all height of the building is 26 feet.

- 2.. Foundation: Stone serpentine rubble laid in thick mortar joints.
3. Wall construction: Serpentine rubble in thick mortar, with brick door and window surrounds. The serpentine stone occurs in local outcroppings.
4. Structural system: Stone bearing walls. Beams, joists and roof structure largely of redwood.
5. Chimneys: There are no chimneys, but a sheet-metal flue pipe projects through the southeast portion of the roof.
6. Openings: The grade level door to the building is on the southwest. Above it at the top of the wall and extending partly into the fascia board is a circular window. On the northwest and southwest there are two windows, one above the other. On the northeast is a doorway at the second-story level
7. Roof: The roof is hipped. The second-floor joists are notched to receive the rafter ends, and soffit and fascia boards are nailed to the undersides and ends of the joists. All members of the roof structure are toe-nailed. Over the rafters are nailed 12"-wide deck boards laid horizontally. Those are covered by wooden shingles, many of which are now missing.

C. Description of Interior:

1. Floor plans: Each floor consists of a single rectangular area.
2. Stairways: There are no interior stairways.
3. Flooring: The ground floor is of deteriorated lime mortar. The upper floor is of tongue-and-groove boards approximately 5" wide resting on 2" x 13" joists supported by two 6" x 8" main beams.
4. Wall and ceiling finish: The walls are stuccoed. All of the frame structural members are exposed.
5. Doorways and doors: Only the front door remains. It consists of an outer layer of vertical boards nailed to an inner layer of horizontal boards.
6. Hardware: There is a ring holding a few chain links on the exterior of the front door and the remains of a piece of iron hardware on the interior of the door.
7. Lighting. There is no provision for artificial lighting.

8. Heating: There is no chimney. Apparently the building was heated by a freestanding stove in the southern side. That is indicated by a metal flue pipe extending above the roof and a round hole under it surrounded by the remains of sheet metal tacked around the edges of the opening.

D. Site:

The building is on a gently sloping grass-covered site on the east side of the Santa Coara Valley.

Prepared by: Robert Bruegmann
Project Supervisor
HABS Santa Clara County Project
August 1977

PART III. SOURCES OF INFORMATION

1. Primary and Unpublished Sources:

- a. Unidentified clippings and notes: The following are in the Morgan Hill Historical Society files at the Santa Clara County Public Library Morgan Hill Branch.
Anonymous. "Incidents of a Walk to Monterey," circa 1849.
Johnson, Lois. "A Valley of Immense Oak Trees," circa 1972.
- b. Deed Books: Santa Clara County Recorder's Office, 70 West Hedding Street, San Jose, CA.

2. Secondary and Published Sources:

- Egan, Ferol. Fremont. Garden City, NY: Doubleday and Co., Inc., 1977.
- Fremont, John Charles. Memoirs of My Life. Chicago and New York: Belford, Clarke & Co., 1887.
- Pierce, Marjorie. "Coyote Ranch: It was built to keep up with the Murphys." San Jose Mercury, October 10, 1971, p. 45.

3. Sources to be Researched:

Oral History of Mr. and Mrs. Douglas Pinard, descendents of Fiacro Fisher, 681 Chestra Drive, Los Altos, CA.

PART IV. PROJECT INFORMATION

This project was undertaken by the Historic American Buildings Survey in cooperation with the County of Santa Clara. The 1977 summer project, the first of a four-year recording project in Santa Clara County, was completed under the general direction of John Poppeliers, Chief of HABS; Kenneth L. Anderson, Jr., Principal Architect; and Robert Bruegmann, Project Supervisor (University of Pennsylvania); with Jack Schafer, Architectural Foreman (University of Cincinnati); Carol Hamm, Historian (Duke University); and Student Architects Tim Allenbrook (Rhode Island School of Design), Barbara Hendricks (University of Texas), and Jeff Lees (University of Oklahoma), at the HABS Field Office in Saratoga, California. The historical data

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were partially edited and further researched during the summer of 1979 by Jan Cigliano, an Architectural Historian on the HABS staff, at the 1979 Field Office in Santa Clara, California. These records were edited into final form in 1981 at the HABS Washington Office by HABS Architectural Historian Denys Peter Myers. The photographs were taken by Photographer Jane Lidz in the summer of 1980.